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ABSTRACT

The Minimum Performance Test (MPT), Metropolitan Achievement Test, Sixth Edition (MAT6), and the new standards required by the 1983 Quality Education Act and their impact on teachers in Arkansas were assessed. A sample of 103 elementary school teachers from 39 school districts indicated that the tests and standards generally met with favorable reception. Some of the teachers commented that they found the tests useful for diagnostics and comparisons, while others observed that the tests encouraged teachers to teach to the specific objectives included on the test. Teachers were divided as to the usefulness of state curriculum guides. Several teachers noted that the guides were needed, especially to ensure curricular consistency among districts, although they involved increased paperwork. The impact in the classroom from the tests and guides has been an effort to teach to or better prepare students for the test and emphasize standardized testing techniques. The primary flaw in the new standards is a lack of adequate funding to ensure their full implementation. Some other problems listed were related to the lack of uniformity in implementation by districts. Some teachers felt that the standards were not well thought out or were so vague that interpretation was difficult. Despite the problems, several teachers stated that the standards were needed or long overdue. The 15 Likert-scale questions administered to the teachers are listed. (TJH)

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The Arkansas MPT, MAT6, and the New Standards:
What 100 Teachers Think

Abstract

The MPT, MAT6, and the new standards required by the 1983 Quality Education Act and their impact on the teachers of Arkansas were investigated. A sample of 103 elementary teachers indicated an overall favorable margin for the testing and the standards. Strong points seemed to be usefulness of the tests for diagnostics and comparison, while increased pressure, and teaching to the test were drawbacks.

Teachers were divided as to the usefulness of state curriculum guides, some finding them useful for determining course content, some finding them restrictive. Several teachers noted that they were needed, especially to ensure curricular consistency among districts, although they brought with them increased paper work.

The impact in the classroom from the tests and guides has been an effort to teach to or better prepare students for the test and emphasize standardized testing techniques. Diagnosis and measuring student progress are useful side benefits, but the increased paper work is a disadvantage.

The primary flaw in the new standards is a lack of adequate funding to ensure their full implementation. Some other problems listed were related to lack of uniformity in implementation by districts. Other teachers felt that the standards were not well thought out or were so vague that interpretation was difficult. Despite the problems, several teachers stated that they were needed or long overdue.

The Arkansas MPT, MAT6, and the New Standards: What 100 Teachers Think

Introduction

Passage of the Quality Education Act in 1983 initiated more than educational reform. Groups and citizens from around the state have supported the changes, including A+ Arkansas, the Arkansas Business Council, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the Department of Education, and the State Legislature (Crownover, 1988; Fowler, 1989; Shameer, 1988; Sissom, 1989). Not everyone has been as supportive, however. Recent articles and editorials in state newspapers indicate that there has been some controversy surrounding these reforms in the minds of the public, educators, businesspeople, and legislators (Bradburn, 1988; Charlton, 1988; Clements, 1988; Davies, 1989; Esser, 1988; Isbell, 1988; and Oswald, 1989a,b). The purpose of this study was to determine the reactions of some of those persons most directly affected by the new education standards: elementary school teachers.

Method

To conduct the study, students enrolled in the two Fall, 1987, and the two Spring, 1988, senior-level Elementary Education courses at the University of Central Arkansas, were asked to provide the contacts. The students interviewed, either by phone or in person, a total of 106 elementary school teachers. Three of the teachers were interviewed both in the Fall and Spring, so only their first set of responses were included.

Findings

Most of the teachers interviewed were female, 95, as opposed to 7 males (This question was left blank on one form.).

The other findings are given in tabular form:

Total Years of Teaching Experience by Number of Years

Years	Number of Respondents
0-3	24
4-8	25
9-15	28
16+	26
Total	**103**

The group was fairly evenly divided in terms of number of years of teaching experience.

Total Years of Teaching in Arkansas by Number of Years

Years	Number of Respondents
0-3	27
4-8	25
9-15	29
16+	22
Total	**103**

Again, the group was fairly evenly divided in terms of number of years of teaching experience in Arkansas. It appears as though most of the teachers did all or most of their teaching in the state.

Years in Current School District by Number of Years

Years	Number of Respondents
0-3	34
4-8	37
9-15	20
16+	12
Total	**103**

The group was not quite as evenly divided in terms of number of years of teaching in the current district, probably indicative of a certain amount of mobility through the years.

Grade Currently Taught

Grade	Number of Respondents
K	16
1	27
2	24
3	34
4	36
5	24
6	20
7-8	2
9-12	1
Total	*

The elementary grades were well represented in the sample. The upper grades resulted from middle school and K-12 certification. The "*" indicates that the total is greater than 103 because many of the teachers taught more than one grade.

Classroom Organization

Type	Number of Respondents
Self-Contained	65
Departmental	24
Resource Room	9
Special Education	7
Speech Pathology	2
Total	*

Most of the teachers taught at least part of the time in self-contained classrooms, although there were a fair number of departmental situations. The "*" indicates that the total is again not equal to 103, because many of the teachers taught in different settings.

The School Districts involved in the study are listed below. Each district represented by more than one teacher has the number of teachers given in parentheses behind its name.

Alma
Beebe (3)
Bee Branch
Bryant (3)
Cabot
Clinton
Conway (31)
Dumas
Fox
Grady
Greenbrier (3)
Griffithville
Guy-Perkins (2)
Heber Springs
Helena/West Helena
Jonesboro
Lakeside (Hot Springs)
Lincoln
Little Rock (6)
Little Rock Catholic (2)
Lonoke
Lynn
Malvern
Marshall
Mountain View
Mount Vernon
Nemo Vista
North Little Rock (3)
Perryville
Pulaski County Special (10)
Quitman
Rural (unspecified)
Searcy
South Conway County (7)
Sulphur Rock
Vann
Valley Springs
Vilonia (5)
Watson Chapel

While a sizable number of teachers were from Conway and the vicinity, there were teachers from as far North as Mountain View, South as Dumas, West as Alma, and East as Helena/West Helena.

School District Size
by Average Daily Attendance (1986-87)

Size	Number of Respondents
0-1000	16
1000-2000	14
2000-3000	12
3000-5000	38
5000+	19
Total	**99**

Other than the bulge caused by a disproportionate number of Conway teachers, the district sizes were fairly well represented. The four districts not accounted for in the table were the two private schools (Little Rock Catholic) and two unidentifiable rural districts.

The following Likert-scale questions were asked of each of the teachers. A summation of their responses follows. The symbols SA, A, U, D, and SD stand for Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, respectively.

	Question	SA	A	U	D	SD
1	Textbook companies provide all the tests that I need for my students.	7	18	5	54	18
2	To prepare my students for tests such as the MAT6 or MPT, I find myself creating many tests and quizzes on my own.	39	40	4	14	5
3	I would like to know more about the MAT6 and/or MPT so I can speak easily with parents about my students' scores.	22	43	10	24	3
4	I employ the normal (bell) curve when I assign grades.	2	12	11	55	17
5	I use the percent system to ultimately determine my students' grades.	29	51	6	12	2
6	I employ interest inventories with my students as a means of gathering information to use in my lessons.	20	53	7	20	3
7	My university course work prepared me to successfully evaluate the academic performance of my students.	7	31	13	33	19
8	The MPT and/or the MAT6 have caused me to change my way of evaluating the academic performance of my students.	11	31	10	41	8
9	I am encouraged/required to employ instructional objectives when planning my lessons.	47	49	0	5	2
10	I consult my grade level course of study when planning many of my lessons.	41	47	3	9	1
11	Knowledge of such measures as standard deviation and correlation coefficient have proved practical in my understanding of how to evaluate my students.	4	27	19	39	14
12	Understanding standardized and informal test information has proved beneficial when I group students for instruction.	26	67	4	3	2
13	Having a building guidance counselor has proved beneficial to me in evaluating the instructional needs of special students.	26	31	18	19	5
14	Parent conferences provide the best possible means for conveying student evaluation information to parents.	59	38	3	3	0
15	Mainstreaming in my classes has required me to spend substantially more time on student evaluation.	17	37	22	17	5

A further investigation into questions 3 and 7 revealed information which may be useful to teacher trainers. Each of the responses to the two questions were broken down by total number of years teaching experience:

3. I would like to know more about the MAT6 and/or MPT so I can speak easily with parents about my students' scores.

Total Number of Years Teaching Experience	SA	A	U	D	SD	Totals
0-3	4	16	4	0	0	24
4-8	8	9	1	5	2	25
9-15	7	10	2	8	0	27
16+	3	8	3	11	1	26
Totals	**22**	**43**	**10**	**24**	**3**	**102**

The response distribution suggests that the newer teachers want more information about the tests than do the more experienced teachers. Those teachers who have graduated most recently, assuming that they started teaching soon after graduation, either are more lacking in information or perceive themselves to be.

7. My university course work prepared me to successfully evaluate the academic performance of my students.

Total Number of Years Teaching Experience	SA	A	U	D	SD	Totals
0-3	2	8	5	9	0	24
4-8	1	10	3	6	5	25
9-15	3	5	3	10	7	28
16+	1	8	2	8	7	26
Totals	**7**	**31**	**13**	**33**	**19**	**103**

The teachers with 9 or more years of teaching experience believe that their teacher training with respect to evaluation practices was more deficient compared to newer teachers. However, newer teachers are evenly divided as to whether their preparation was adequate.

Five open-ended questions were asked of the teachers. Their general reactions are followed with more specific comments and number of respondents making those statements, if over 3% of the sample:

1. What is your general reaction to required student minimum performance testing (MPT) in grades 3, 6, and 8?

Reaction	Number of Respondents
Positive	75
Ambivalent	9
Negative	12

Useful to diagnose or measure student progress (25)
Needed (18)
Increases pressure on students (12)
Too late to use it for retention, especially in the 8th grade (9)
Increases pressure on teachers (7)
Encourages teaching to the test (7)
Should not be the sole basis for retention (7)

2. **What is your general reaction to required student achievement testing (MAT6) in grades 4, 7, and 10?**

Reaction	Number of Respondents
Positive	68
Ambivalent	16
Negative	10

Useful to diagnose or measure student progress (31)
Good for statewide or nationwide comparisons of scores (9)
Increases pressure on teachers (7)
Increases pressure on students (7)
Encourages teaching to the test (6)
Good for planning curriculum or lessons (6)
Unnecessary (4)

3. **What is your general reaction to required adherence to state adopted courses of study or curriculum guides?**

Reaction	Number of Respondents
Positive	67
Ambivalent	7
Negative	14

Useful as a content guide (24)
Tends to limit what the teacher may do or teach (22)
Needed (10)
Allows curricular consistency among school districts (9)
Makes for more paper work for teachers (6)

4. **How have any of the above influenced your method(s) of evaluating student performance/achievement or teaching?**

Encourages teaching to the test (30)
Has not influenced me (already doing what they require) (22)
Useful to diagnose or measure student progress (13)
Emphasizing standardized testing techniques (11)
Makes for more paper work for teachers (6)

5. **Overall, what is your reaction to the new Arkansas Education Standards?**

Reaction	Number of Respondents
Positive	62
Ambivalent	15
Negative	18

Need money to be able to implement them (21)
They have both good points and bad points (11)
There are problems with implementation, especially lack of uniformity among school districts (10)
Makes for more paper work for teachers (8)
Hurriedly planned and implemented (6)
Long overdue (6)
Needed (4)
Have always done these things anyway (4)
So vague, cannot get straight interpretation from the Department of Education (4)
Only a starting point (4)

Limitations

Although the sample size is slightly over 100 and appears to be reasonably representative, it should be noted that it is not randomly selected, so that generalizability of the findings may be questionable. Also, the interviewer and interviewee were familiar with each other, which could bias the type or tone of the responses. Finally, the reactions of "positive", "ambivalent", and "negative" were the author's interpretations of the responses.

Summary

The teachers who participated in the study indicated a clear margin of favor for MPT and MAT6 testing, and the new standards, although there was a noticeable minority opposed in all cases. Strong points seemed to be usefulness of the tests for diagnostics and comparison, while increased pressure, and teaching to the test were drawbacks. Several teachers felt that using only the MPT, for retention purposes, was unwise.

A sizeable number of teachers felt that the state curriculum guides were useful for determining course content, but as nearly as large a group felt that they were restrictive for essentially the same reason. Several teachers noted that they were needed, especially to ensure curricular consistency among districts, although they brought with them increased paper work.

The impact in the classroom from the tests and guides has been an effort to teach to or better prepare for the test, especially with regard to emphasizing standardized testing techniques. Diagnosis and measuring student progress are useful side benefits, but the increased paper work is a disadvantage. A fair number of teachers felt that their work had been at such a level that changes were not necessary for them.

Finally, the primary flaw in the new standards is a lack of adequate funding to ensure their full implementation. A number of teachers noted that there were both good and bad points which accounts for the relatively large number of ambivalent responses. Some of the problems listed were related to implementation, a process which was not perceived to be handled uniformly in the various districts. Other teachers felt that the standards were not well thought out or were so vague that interpretation was difficult. Despite the problems, several teachers stated that they were needed or long overdue.

Conclusions

The MPT, MAT6, and the new standards have had an impact on the teachers of Arkansas, as suggested by a sample of 103 elementary teachers. While it has increased pressure on them and their students, as well as increasing paper work, many teachers are making an effort to ensure that their students master at least basic skills.

There may be some problems, though, both in terms of the training teachers have received in their teacher-education programs and in terms of their understanding of the freedom available to them under the new standards. Many of the teachers wanted more information about the MPT and the MAT6 to enable them to better explain students' scores to parents. Some topics, including standard deviation and correlation coefficient, have been of lesser value to some teachers; while others, including standardized and informal testing techniques, have been of far more value. In addition, a number of teachers seemed to be confused as to what they could and could not teach. Some felt constrained by time, expectations, or accountability, to teaching only basic skills, while others recognized that they were only a starting point. In any case, it seems that there is still a considerable lack of understanding among some teachers and administrators about the tests and standards and how they should be used and interpreted. Better classroom instruction at the teacher education program level and the use of staff development time, for discussions and explanations of the tests and standards for teachers and administrators, would seem to be a worthwhile expenditure of time until a better understanding of these issues is shared by all educators.

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